A clash of narratives

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In the clash of narratives between Russia and NATO states, Moscow has clearly gained an upper hand. Russian success stems not only from the fact that the Kremlin has been able to send a much clearer and more coherent message than the Alliance, but also because NATO states do not have one narrative, or counter-narrative.

One of the central concerns when analysing international security and its history is how to explain certain events and their impact on international politics. For policy-makers and societies it is crucial to define "who we are" and "what kind of world order we want". The passing decade has been marked by a return to a crisis between the West and Russia (sometimes referred to as the New Cold War), with conflict over Russian aggression in Ukraine being the most striking example. Yet the indirect confrontation between NATO and Russia should be measured not only in political disputes, economic calculations and military build-up, but also in terms of the competing narratives that have shaped the understanding or misunderstanding of partners and adversaries alike.

One of the ways that the Kremlin gains political and diplomatic ground in international affairs is by putting a wedge between NATO allies, namely, between the United States and its European partners. This was quite evident in the recent intra-NATO rift over Turkey's decision to purchase S-400 missile systems from Russia and deploy military troops, hand in hand with Russian forces, in Syria last October. Simultaneously, even a glance at Europe reveals challenges to its security and stability: Ukraine, Libya, Syria, Algeria, Iran, Turkey – to name just a few states that lay in the so-called arc of instability, and which are influenced, to a certain extent, by the direct policies of the Russian Federation.

Context is king, but the king is naked

It is a euphemism to claim we live in the world of storytelling. In pre-internet times, the victors mostly had a monopoly on telling "the truth", while those who came second or third were forced to tell their story mostly to themselves. This is no longer the case. With the rapid development of social media, the rise of populist movements, and rampant disinformation campaigns, states have increasingly focused on pushing their narratives to reach domestic and sympathetic global audiences. As a result, a contemporary struggle for power, security and influence among state and non-state actors alike has increasingly been supported with targeting audiences with tailored interpretations of events.

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There seems to be no better example of diverging narratives than ones employed during the latest rift within the Euro-Atlantic alliance. To be fair, though, some of the actions and official rhetoric from the western states made the lives of Russian propaganda makers a bit easier. The most famous example of such behaviour in 2019 came from the French president, Emmanuel Macron. He told *The Economist* that NATO is "brain dead" and "European countries can no longer rely on America to protect its allies". It happened to be almost irrelevant that the French leader also touched upon a number of key issues, including a clear-eyed and cold-blooded realpolitik analysis of European security and transatlantic relations. Or that his assessment that Europe needs to rethink its strategic role is accurate, while NATO should reassess its role in contemporary security architecture. The damage was done to the already strained transatlantic dialogue; and the Kremlin surely enjoyed it.

This is not to single out one particular European leader, as critics of the Alliance within NATO itself are plenty (from Donald Trump to Turkey's Recep Erdoğan). Yet Macron's comments symbolise the growing trend within the transatlantic community that serves – though unintentionally – Russia's long-term interest in the European realm. Even when Macron is partially right – when he points towards American slow disengagement from Europe in order to concentrate on the Asian continent – he fails to mention the deployment of US and NATO troops to the Eastern flank of the Alliance. In other words, the narrative that he advances tells only one side of the story, a side that, according to a common understanding of the French position within NATO, serves the purpose of developing European defence autonomy.

In this context, the biggest issue with his interview was the part where he doubts whether Article 5 of the Washington Treaty (which states that an attack on one country is an attack on all) would work, turning his attention to the imperative of European defensive autonomy, and finishing with a statement calling for a need of reopening a strategic dialogue with Russia. It can be argued that saying those things did no good to either transatlantic relations or European fading attempts of finding a coherent response to a resurgent Russia.

The sympathisers

There are a few European politicians who have played into Russia's narratives much stronger than Macron. Hungary's prime minister, Victor Orbán, famous for his euroscepticism and departure from the liberal democratic path, has not shied away from tightening Budapest's relations with Moscow (even after Russia's invasion and annexation of Crimea which was unequivocally seen by the West as a flagrant violation of basic international norms). Suffice to say that in the span of four years (2016–2019) Orbán and Vladimir Putin met five times, making Hungary one of Russia's closest partners within the NATO and the EU alike. In October 2019, the Hungarian leader explained this close relationship through the prism of old fashion geopolitics, remarking that "we live in a Berlin-Moscow-Istanbul triangle".

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In Italy the tradition of pro-Russian sentiment among political circles is also strong with Silvio Berlusconi and Matteo Salvini being the most obvious cases. Even the pro-western and pro-US prime minister Matteo Renzi (2014–2016) attempted to pursue closer economic co-operation between Rome and Moscow. Even though his government backed initial sanctions against Moscow after the onset of the conflict in Ukraine, Renzi opposed their renewal "and searched for openings to bring Russia back into Europe's security discussions". It did not help transatlantic coherence when Renzi referred to Russia as an indispensable partner for Europe, and "praising Putin's 'wise approach' to controversial issues on the global stage, such as the Syrian crisis."

Meanwhile, the diverse European spectrum has produced a number of fringe political parties that are openly pro-Russian and pro-Putin; Marie Le Pen's National Rally being one of the examples, followed by UKIP, Podemos, Syriza and the Northern League. What seems worrisome from the European perspective, is a

reoccurring pro-Kremlin stance of some mainstream European leaders, especially since this trend has occurred at a time when Russia's hostile actions include targeted disinformation campaigns, assassinations of western citizens, and anti-western propaganda. Yet in order to understand why such a trend might be dangerous for NATO's European members one would need to look at Russia's official narratives that have been used to justify its foreign policy.

From Russia with disinformation

For a casual observer of Russian politics, the narratives behind the Kremlin's foreign policy advanced for the last two decades (not coincidentally equal with Vladimir Putin's reign over Russia) appear to be straightforward and cohesive. First, they refer to the status of Russia as an "independent global power" and its identity as something that is "historically destined" to remain fully independent from the West or China. In 2005 Putin famously called the collapse of the Soviet Union a catastrophe, and reinforced his statement in 2018 saying that "he would reverse the collapse of the Soviet Union if he had a chance to alter modern Russian history". From this perception comes the Kremlin's (mis)understanding of its place in the world, with its core demand to be treated as a global power, equal to that of the United States or China. Moscow refuses to be dominated by other powers and hegemons.

Second, such a view helps to justify official Russian rhetoric of treating NATO as a hostile threat. For the Kremlin, NATO is nothing more than an "American puppet" in a grand chess game for "spheres of influences". This explains Russia's paranoid reaction to the instalment of elements of the US strategic missile defence system in Poland and Romania. As Putin claimed in a 2018 interview: "this poses a direct threat to our national security. Therefore, the advancement of NATO infrastructure towards our borders poses a threat, and our reaction to it will be extremely negative." In 2014, when Russia invaded Crimea, Putin not only justified these steps by protecting Russians living there but also said that most of Russia's actions were nothing more than reactions to the West's menacing and "dishonest" policies. "This happened with NATO's expansion to the East, as well as the deployment of military infrastructure at our borders," Putin said in 2014.

Another element of the Kremlin's narrative is that the current international relations landscape has changed favourably for Russia, as the current world order is no longer dominated by the United States. Therefore, in what Moscow sees as a post-West world (or the declining liberal order), Russia should regain its rightful position as a global superpower.

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These narratives along with an increase in Russian NATO-phobic rhetoric have several explanations. According to Vasile Rotaru (a 2019 Parnership for Peace Fellow at NATO Defense College) they include what Moscow calls "the expansion" of NATO towards Russia's borders, "Moscow's perception of being a 'besieged fortress', the Kremlin's need for both a scapegoat for its foreign policy failures and an impetus to rally the population around the flag; a strategy to secure the annexation of Crimea and to consolidate Russia's foreign policy positions".

In the clash of narratives between Russia and NATO states, Moscow has clearly gained an upper hand. Russian success stems not only from the fact that, as an autocratic state and unitary actor in international relations, it has been able to send

a much clearer and coherent message than the Alliance; but also because NATO states do not have a single narrative, or rather counter-narrative: they have diverging and often competing perceptions of Moscow's role in international relations. Those competing narratives within the transatlantic alliance do not come from the weakness of NATO, as some of the critics have argued, but from the sheer number of member states, diversity of interests and visions they bring. Nevertheless the problem of different competing narratives has been used by Moscow to drive a wedge between the allies.

And this brings us back to the Russian dimension of Macron's interview. For many leaders in Central and Eastern Europe the most controversial part was not necessarily about NATO's inability to act, but rather about the French president's call for Europe to rethink its relations with Russia. Nothing reinforces Poland's scepticism towards a European security framework more than the idea of appeasing Moscow, as articulated by Paris or (lately not that often) Berlin. Needless to say Russia is here to stay and the need to have communication with Moscow that can, at some point, turn into dialogue is a necessity. States that neighbour Russia would be first to admit that. Yet talks do not equal concessions – especially if a concession at hand would have to be a silent consent of the West and accept that Crimea is now a Russian territory.

Even though this might be a fact of life, Crimea, legally speaking, is still part of Ukraine. By accepting Russia's *fait accompli*, western powers would virtually reward the Kremlin's aggressive actions that would in turn send a terrible message – namely, that the territorial integrity of (European) states is up for re-negotiation. Therefore, few should be surprised that Central and Eastern European and the Baltic states are wary of the situation where European powers would make a deal with Russia to go back to business as usual. Particularly, if this potential rapprochement with Russia would coincide with diminishing US security presence in Europe. For NATO and European security that would be a strategic blunder.

Competing intra-NATO narratives… and Moscow's gains

As the heated discussions within NATO indicate, there were a number of narratives that shaped the transatlantic debate and the question of European security. Here, let us concentrate on four of the most predominant ones*.

* I cite the first three narratives from Justyna Gotkowska's recent article, published by the Centre for Eastern Studies: https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2019-12-04/nato-transition.

First, the Western European narrative, introduced and promoted by France, and also quite popular in Germany, concentrates on the assumption that, since the United States is mostly preoccupied with competition with China and engaged in the Asia-Pacific region, the Americans are withdrawing their military and political commitments from Europe. As a result, the transatlantic Alliance might not be the best tool for European defence and security.

Second, the current American narrative emphasises global overstretch of the United States, intensely signalling that Washington cannot, and will not, solve all the security problems that European NATO member states are facing, while, at the same time, maintaining its strategic posture *vis-à-vis* China. Therefore, from this vantage point, European allies should become more self-dependent in providing their own security, which requires an increase in military spending within NATO Europe (the famous two per cent of GDP threshold).

Third is a narrative of the eastern flank states that emphasises an ongoing threat from Russia and the necessity of countering it through NATO; or even better, via bilateral security arrangements with the United States. In this view, NATO is indeed an important part of European security architecture, but mostly if it is able to "keep the Americans in". As long as the United States stands strong within the Alliance, NATO proves its value and utility as a defence pact. By adopting a similar logic, one of the worst-case scenarios from the perspective of the eastern flank states, would be a situation where an adversary decides to test NATO's collective defence by pursuing an unconventional (i.e. cyber; paramilitary) attack on one of its members. For Central Europe and the Baltic states, future interpretations of what constitutes an attack under Article 5 are much more than a red herring.

And finally, the southern flank states adopted a narrative that argues that most of today's threats to European security come from the Middle East, North Africa and Sahel. In contrast to the previous narrative, this one advocates a focus on addressing immigration, the refugee crisis, and the rise of violent non-state actors (including ISIS). From this perspective, the United States, with its inconsistent polices in those regions, is not entirely seen as stability-bringing and NATO is viewed as a welcomed force, provided it can address the issues of the southern flank (and after intervention in Libya, that proposition is highly contested).

Not good news

Each of these narratives, in themselves, constitutes a by-product of a clash in national interests and different geopolitical realities. Each of them has caused some stir within the Alliance. But most importantly, the Kremlin has used them

to discredit NATO and diminish the security of European member states. When Macron stated that NATO is brain dead (referring to the lack of strategic communication between the US and other members), Russian officials praised him, calling his words "golden" and "… an exact definition of the current state of NATO."

Furthermore, a potential American withdrawal from Europe (and potentially from NATO) would be a gift for Putin and Russia's position in international relations. The Kremlin has repeatedly singled out NATO as a threat to Russian security. NATO, without the Americans in Europe, would virtually mean no NATO at all. This is why Russian officials praise President Trump every time he criticises NATO or hints that a withdrawal might be contemplated.

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With regards to the eastern flank narrative, the Russian official response has been consistent for the past two decades, implying that countries like Poland and Romania dwell on Russophobia and warmongering, and that the Baltic states are oppressing the Russian minorities and thus obstructing one of Putin's sacred rhetorical elements: "defending Russian people abroad". Putin's latest rhetorical attack on Poland and its alleged role in starting the Second World War is not only an attempt to discredit Poland but more broadly an example of Kremlin's narrative to target one of the NATO members. Given the lack of a strong unified response from the European allies, so far it seems like Moscow has succeeded.

In the southern flank of NATO, a Russian counter-narrative has also been heard. Putin interpreted the Arab Uprisings, and particularly NATO's intervention in Libya, as an impulse to re-engage with the Middle East and North Africa. According to the Kremlin, Russia is much better suited to solve problems in the region since it is "impartial" and does not seek to change non-democratic regimes there, unlike the western powers. The obvious benefits for Moscow of such an approach towards NATO's southern flank were visible in Russia's relations with Turkey, Syria and Libya. Moreover, Russia has exploited the lack of a coherent western policy in the region to become the leading political and diplomatic force there; a power that would participate in all major negotiations, thus boosting its credibility as an "independent global power".

As each country within NATO is sovereign, they can pursue their foreign policy independently, which includes the ability to sustain bilateral relations with other states in a manner they see fit. Yet it seems undeniably risky for the Alliance and European security to send mixed signals about the main strategic direction *vis-à-vis* the Kremlin's policies.

While NATO has been doing a sufficient job of deterring Russia and reassuring allies after 2014, some of the member states have decided to pursue warmer relations with Russia. In this way, some of Moscow's perceptions of NATO and the West have been validated: but even though we might live in a post-West and post-liberal world order, diffusion of transatlantic unity is by no means good news for Europe and its security. While avoiding escalation and establishing a working relationship with Russia should be one of NATO and the EU's top priorities, even more central should be the goal of keeping both the transatlantic and European projects alive – as they, not the Kremlin, have been, and will remain, guarantors of prosperity and security for the whole Euro-Atlantic realm.

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